

REVIEW ARTICLE

The French Experience in Newfoundland and Saint-Pierre: Recent Translations

JAMES E. CANDOW

Julien Thoulet. *A Voyage to Newfoundland*. Edited and translated by Scott Jamieson. [www.mqup.mcgill.ca], 2005, ISBN 0-7735-2867-9

Œuvres de Mer. "Newfoundland: The Mariners' Family Home in Saint-Pierre: The Hospital Ship." Translated by Aspi Balsara. Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2005, ISBN 0-88901-400-0

Charles de la Morandière. "The French Cod Fishery in Newfoundland." Translated by Aspi Balsara. Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2005, ISBN 0-88901-392-6

Laurier Turgeon. "The Era of the Far-Distant Fisheries: Permanence and Transformation (circa 1500-1850)." Translated by Aspi Balsara. Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2005, ISBN 0-88901-394-2

Robert Perret. "Diary of a Journey to Newfoundland." Translated by Aspi Balsara. Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2005, ISBN 0-88901-396-9

Doctor Brissot. "Health and Hygiene aboard the Ships Transporting Cod Fishermen from Saint-Malo to Newfoundland, March 13-27, 1907." Translated by Aspi Balsara. Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2005, ISBN 0-88901-398-5

THESE SCHOLARLY ARTICLES and period accounts, which have been translated from the original French by Aspi Balsara and Scott Jamieson, reveal aspects of the shared history of Newfoundland and Saint-Pierre from the French perspective. They are proof of a lively interest in the French fact in Newfoundland and Labrador that has been sparked by scholars from Memorial University and Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, and by members of the public who have awakened to the French heritage of their families and communities. We can only hope that the current level of interest does not indicate a trend that is peaking, but rather one that will continue to grow.

Although the discovery of the northwest Atlantic fishing grounds is usually attributed to John Cabot, who sailed on behalf of England, the English were relatively slow to exploit the fisheries in comparison with the Bretons, Normans, Basques (French and Spanish), and Portuguese. The French have also been the most enduring participants in the northwest Atlantic fisheries, and it is a matter of no small significance that the archipelago of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon is all that remains of France's once vast North American territory. It is therefore somewhat surprising, as anthropologist Jean Malaurie acknowledged in his introduction to Charles de la Morandière's "The French Cod Fishery in Newfoundland" (originally published in 1967), that until the publication of Morandière's three-volume *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue dans l'Amérique septentrionale* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962-66) (of which this article is a condensed version), French fishermen and the Newfoundland fisheries had attracted little study in their homeland; even Morandière's magnum opus elicited but a single scholarly review.

But Morandière had blazed the trail, and others would gradually follow in his footsteps, notably Laurier Turgeon and Jean-François Brière. Turgeon's superb overview, "The Era of the Far-Distant Fisheries," taken from Michel Mollat's *Histoire des pêches maritimes en France* (Toulouse: Privat, 1987), underscored the shortcomings of Morandière's work, which perpetuated the myth that cod was a cheap food, gave only passing attention to markets, and overemphasized the role of Normandy and Brittany at the expense of other parts of the country, especially the Basque southwest. As an introduction to France's North American fisheries in all their dimensions, Turgeon's article is still unrivalled, although the French Caribbean slave market for salted cod is as minor in his worldview as it was in Morandière's.

The four other pieces in the collection are translations of period accounts of the French experience in Newfoundland and Saint-Pierre, with an inescapable emphasis on fisheries. In 1886, oceanographer Julien Thoulet joined the warship *Clorinde*

in a scientific capacity as it visited Saint-Pierre, the French treaty shore in western and northeastern Newfoundland, southern Labrador, and Cape Breton. His observations from that trip are the foundation of *A Voyage to Newfoundland*, a first-rate piece of travel literature that has been beautifully translated by Scott Jamieson. We can easily forgive Thoulet's overwrought digressions to extol the heroic qualities of fishermen, because these are countered by profound insights into the regions' peoples and fisheries. Unfortunately, Robert Perret, whose "Diary of a Journey to Newfoundland" was originally published in 1908, is a less amiable travelling companion. Like many visitors to Newfoundland, Perret made the common mistake of trying to see too much in too short a time, virtually ensuring the kind of shallow reportage that Perret delivers in spades. His is also a view of Newfoundland and Saint-Pierre through a snob's monocle, and when he absurdly blames the decline of Saint-Pierre's fisheries on the "improvidence, discord and laziness" of its people, Thoulet's romantic stereotypes almost begin to look appealing.

For a stiff dose of reality, we need look no farther than the two remaining pieces in the collection, beginning with Dr. Brissot's account of health and hygiene aboard the steamship *Sylvie* during its Atlantic crossing from Saint-Malo in March 1907, bringing out some 1,200 fishermen to work for Saint-Pierre schooner owners during the upcoming fishing season. Disease, drunkenness, and alcoholism were rampant, which is perhaps not news, but what is surprising, even shocking, is that nearly half of the "men" were between twelve and twenty years of age. Might similar conditions have prevailed in the eighteenth-century passenger traffic to Newfoundland that was so central to the profitability of the British bank fishery? Even if they did not, the role of the *Sylvie* speaks to a broad continuity of tradition in the northwest Atlantic fisheries.

Alcoholism at sea and the attractions of cheap rum ashore in Saint-Pierre (the result of trade with the French Caribbean) were among the factors that prompted the Augustinians of the Assumption to form the Société Œuvres de Mer in 1894. The final work under review comes from the society's bulletin for 1897, which describes that year's efforts to provide social and medical services to fishermen in and around Saint-Pierre, and, as always, to save as many souls as possible. The Mariner's Home that the society operated in Saint-Pierre had several useful functions, including an extremely popular letter-writing service for illiterate fishermen. Equally valuable was the society's roving hospital ship that administered to the sick and injured aboard the fishing schooners. The capacity for violence among fishermen is shown by the case of a cabin boy who died shortly after being brought into Saint-Pierre by the hospital ship. He had not been hurt in the line of duty but instead had been so viciously beaten by his fellow crewmembers that his entire body was a putrid mess of bruises and open wounds. It is impossible not to extrapolate from this incident that sexual abuse must have been an additional horror awaiting the highly vulnerable cabin boys and, similarly, children employed in the shore stations at Saint-Pierre. There is an obvious parallel between the work of the Société Œuvres de Mer and the

British Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, which brought Wilfred Grenfell to Newfoundland and Labrador in this same decade.

As the contours of the French fisheries in the northwest Atlantic become better known, so too the opportunities for comparative study will increase, not just in and around Newfoundland and Saint-Pierre but also between them and the broader Atlantic world. Comparative work (on which Peter Pope has already embarked) will be a welcome development, because the French and the British have occupied largely separate spheres in Newfoundland historiography, with unfortunate results. Peter Neary has rightly noted that while opposition to the French presence was a key factor in the emergence of Newfoundland nationalism, this was a simplistic and self-delusional nationalism that tended to blame the French for any and all economic problems, including ones whose causes were more deeply rooted. As epitomized by the notorious Francophobe Daniel Woodley Prowse, Newfoundland historians long portrayed the French as invaders and as obstacles to the achievement of Newfoundland's own "manifest destiny," that is, to be British from coast to coast. Anti-French attitudes and outright ignorance survived long past their due date, and the nadir was probably Frederick Rowe's *History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980), in which a chapter devoted to settlement history completely glossed over the French royal colony of Plaisance (Placentia).

Although it is frequently a source of irritation to Newfoundlanders, the northwest Atlantic fisheries were international from the outset of European exploitation, and that international character is as real today as it is almost certain to be in the future. This poses a challenge to the writing of fisheries history and the history of Newfoundland and Labrador, because French, English, Basque, and Portuguese form part of the linguistic mosaic, as do Gaelic and First Nations' tongues. For unilingual English readers, publications such as those reviewed here will undoubtedly help to foster understanding, but it is impossible to translate everything, and there can be no substitute for a researcher who is able to function in more than one language. It is therefore heartening to see Aspi Balsara and Scott Jamieson joining the small but growing ranks of multilingual scholars with an interest in the province's history.

In a review such as this, some concluding remarks of a technical nature are unavoidable. It is puzzling that Balsara chose to translate Morandière's article when Turgeon's covers a lot of the same ground and is so obviously superior. It would have been better for unilingual readers if, for instance, Balsara had tackled one or more of the chapters on Plaisance in the first volume of Morandière's *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue dans l'Amérique septentrionale*. Jamieson's translation of Thoulet always rings true, and the book comes with detailed endnotes (a handful of which go into overkill) and a fine introduction that traces Thoulet's life and career and situates him in his times. Balsara's translations do not rise to the level of near-poetry that Jamieson achieves, although this may just reflect the limitations of the original material. At times, Balsara wavers slightly in his grasp of

fisheries history terminology, for example translating Turgeon's "pêches lointaines" as "far-distant fisheries," when the standard usage is simply "distant fisheries." The perfunctory nature of Balsara's introductions, the lack of biographical information about his authors, and his rare use of notes may disappoint some readers, but these shortcomings are undoubtedly a function of a tight, even unreasonable, schedule, for Balsara tackled all five articles during a one-year sabbatical. The important thing is that he got the job done, and for that we owe him (and likewise Scott Jamieson) our gratitude.

